

The King is Dead; Long Live the King: Is It Possible to Co-Construct EP Advice Given the ‘New’ Code of Practice?

Dr Sarif Alrai

Educational Psychologist, Essex County Council

Abstract

This article highlights my reflections on the process of co-constructing the Psychological Advice component of the Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP). Having completed various pieces of Advice for EHCPs, I set about trying to make my Advice more meaningful. Knowing the young person about whom this article is written, and some of her life experiences, it seemed apt to try an approach where she got to dictate her needs rather than be told them. I set about co-constructing my Psychological Advice with her. As part of this article, I offer things to consider and be mindful of if attempting to work in this way.

Introduction

Background

There are, in fact, two reasons I am being deliberately facetious about the use of the word ‘new’. The first, there will be a day when the ‘new’ Code of Practice (CoP) (2015) will no longer be new; therefore for the purpose of this article I will simply make reference to the CoP (2015). The second, admittedly, I only qualified as an Educational Psychologist (EP) in 2015. However, I was full of promise in my third year of training that the expert position of the EP providing Statutory Advice would be something of a negotiable capacity. *Quelle surprise* in September 2014 I would be asked to complete an Appendix D¹. Though, having spoken with colleagues across various services, I understand that I was not alone in this. There was only one request for an Appendix D after September 2014, thereafter all requests for Psychological Advice were in line with the CoP (2015).

I practice in a fairly large home county. In my first term as a qualified EP much of my supervision was spent reflecting on the amount of statutory requests I had been allocated. And I am fully aware that I was far from leading the group when it came to the number of allocations. My concerns were regarding the relevance of my Advice in the lives of the children for whom I was supposedly advocating. I felt that I was writing relevant advice. I was uncomfortable being perceived as the expert, who, having had the audacity to spend 3–5 hours working with a child, could tell the world of the specific provision required for this person to achieve outcomes that I thought were useful². Early into my second term as a qualified EP I became disillusioned with my role as an EP. I had spent three fantastic years training as a practitioner psychologist, believing that I needed to be the difference that made a difference, yet I was not getting the satisfaction from the work that I was doing. Once again, through supervision I was able to ascertain the source of my disillusionment, and I made a conscious decision to write my reports and Advice as letters to children and young people (CYP)³. One major influential factor to my philosophical position as an EP has been the work of Gersch (1996), with reference to the voice of the child; so I hope it’s not my hubris that encouraged me to embark upon the journey I took when I decided to take the process of writing EP Advice a step further, moving from writing Advice as a letter to a CYP to co-constructing Advice with the CYP.

Purpose

Thus, the purpose of this article and ultimately my reflections of whether or not it is, or would be, possible to write EP Advice in a co-constructed manner with a CYP. For the ethical purposes, I have altered potentially identifying information regarding the CYP, as well as seeking consent from the young-person in question. For the young person’s ‘profile’ please see Appendix A.

¹ An Appendix D is Psychological Advice, usually requested by a Local Educational Authority as an indication of the provisions required to meet the educational needs of a child.

² I am fully aware that there are plenty of examples of good and great practice occurring day-to-day, my comments are personal to me, based on my reflections with an astute and conscientious supervisor.

³ This is an evolving process and is far from perfect. There are multiple reasons that I decided to write reports/Advice in this way. These are not directly relevant to this piece and so I have deliberately decided not to explore them here.

Structure

This piece is constructed using my thoughts throughout the process of co-constructing Advice as well as my musings and reflections through supervision. As such, the structure for this reflection will be based around the themes of within the reflections.

Reflections

Within child vs within system

For much of my short time as an EP I believed there was a dichotomous dialogue between professionals: issues existed either within a child or within a system, maybe somewhere in-between. The privilege of co-constructing this Advice with Suzy forced me to reflect the following: how did Suzy attempt to conceptualise this seemingly random work? In some ways, having access to a wealth of information made it difficult for me not to preconceive ideas about what Suzy's issues might have been. I use the phrase 'Suzy's issues' deliberately; the dominant narrative in the paperwork was that the problems indeed existed within Suzy.

Suzy knew full well that she was like no other child in her class, but Suzy also wanted desperately to be like the others. This idea that there was a problem somewhere along the line was crystallised by my appearance and *spiel* about creating a system that works for her. This would have been all the evidence that she needed to substantiate her self-awareness of how different she was from her peers — as if her accent wasn't enough to set her apart. Something that I regret not taking the opportunity to do was try to unpick her take on the whole statutory process. Maybe I was working to a tight deadline or maybe I was paying lip service to co-constructing this Advice or maybe I was an expert in a role that desperately required me to be anything but.

In a sense, my arrival colluded with a narrative of this being Suzy's problem, regardless of how much I tried to make this about any school providing appropriate provision. This process from Suzy's point of view makes her the faulty cog in the machine.

The role of the expert

Suzy's social worker, her class teacher, the other teaching staff and her carers all positioned me as an expert. This is something that I have come to expect. Whilst I may be an 'expert' in psychology, I knew Suzy least out of all the adults who were around the metaphorical table. Yet, for some reason, I had decided that there were things that I needed to include in this report. That is to say, having read the paperwork, I arrived at school with preconceived ideas of what this Advice needed to contain.

Further, I even had a template within which I had to incorporate both my and Suzy's ideas. Why do I say 'my' before 'Suzy's'? This is something that I agonised over in supervision. Try as I might, I feel that this exercise, as useful as it was, was my way of trying to empower Suzy to be an expert — but became Suzy's ideas given in my words. I have yet to decide whether this is good enough. The example I used to highlight this reflection was when I was asking Suzy what things she would like in her report. She did not include something that I felt was paramount. Now one may argue that my role as the psychologist is to make these sorts of decisions, and having spoken with Suzy she did see the necessity of having this topic discussed in the Advice. However, given Suzy did not mention this topic when I asked her what she would like to discuss, maybe I should have not included it. In attempting to empower Suzy, part of me feels as though I gave her a false sense of control.

This section opens up the discussion around whose agenda should take precedence: mine, as I have been commissioned to write the Advice, or Suzy's, as I have tried to position her as the expert?

Advocating vs co-constructing⁴

Are these two terms on the opposite ends of a spectrum, where using one approach is, by definition, not using the other? Advocacy can usually be described as supporting publicly or arguing on someone's behalf. My understanding of co-construction is working together to produce something on the way to achieving a goal. Begging the question, whose goal is the EHCP⁵?

In this example I believe I am co-constructing. That is to say I worked with Suzy to outline the provisions she required to develop academically, emotionally and socially. Thinking about the overall process, my/our Advice was one of several. If the Advice from other professionals were not holding true to Suzy's view of her needs in the way that I feel that mine was, did that dilute the whole process? I conceptualised this in two ways to try and understand this; either I was replacing the car's oil filter (Psychological Advice) but still using the old oil (EHCP process) or I was working away on the car's oil filter (Psychological Advice) but the owner bought the car in for a new set of tyres (EHCP

⁴ Whilst there may be models of advocacy and co-construction, I will be using dictionary definitions of these two terms.

⁵ An EHCP is the statutory document that outlines the provisions required, by-law, to support a CYP in an educational setting. The EHCP replaces the Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) from the previous CoP.

process). Either I'm setting out to achieve something that is being diluted or I'm setting out to achieve something different from what the process actually requires of me.

Expectation vs reality

Maybe I watch too many Hollywood movies, but the act of co-constructing did not feel as I expected. If someone had walked into the room, they would have seen me typing and Suzy speaking or me typing and Suzy drawing. This was not the Thunderdome — this was a mainstream primary school, midweek. So the question arises, what does co-construction even look like? Having been part of multidisciplinary teams, I have an expectation of people around the table bouncing ideas off each other. Maybe Suzy and I hadn't had the opportunity to develop a relationship, but there was something about our work together which felt laboured on her part. That is to say, did it mean to her what I hoped it would have? Once again, I regret not taking the opportunity to explore this with her further.

Market forces

In the world of the CoP (2015) we are required to work with service users to co-construct needs and educational provisions. As above, I engaged with this task for professional reasons, given my philosophical beliefs as an EP. And, strictly speaking, I believe this type of engagement is in line with the intentions of said CoP (2015). But, in the reality of Local Educational Authority (LEA) employment and the pressures of multiple requests for Statutory Advice, is this approach feasible? I can only speak from my own experience, but, in the face of all of my supposed doom and gloom, I would like to think that this is a feasible approach — not least of all because of the value that this might offer a CYP.

What advice would I give to anyone who wishes to try to co-construct Advice?

Primum non nocere (first, do no harm)

When all is said and done, regardless of your agenda, the purpose of working this way is to help elicit a child's views. In some cases they are likely to be difficult things to talk about; part of being clear and boundaried is maintaining your role as a practitioner.

Be clear and boundaried

Whilst reflecting with a CYP in this way can be intervention in and of itself, the intention of the interaction is to co-produce Advice, not therapeutic.

Be present

Listen; don't hear.

Be prepared: emotionally and literally

The emotional aspect is whether or not the process of co-constructing Advice is what you expect it to be. The literal aspect of preparation comes from knowing who the CYP is before working with them in this way. Not from the paperwork, but from the CYP themselves. In line with being prepared, I firmly believe that having known Suzy prior to being asked to provide this Advice worked in my favour. And, that if I had tried to learn about her from the paperwork, I would have felt less sincere.

Be patient: with CYP but also yourself

If Rome wasn't built in one day, Advice can't be constructed in one, let alone co-constructed. As highlighted in my experience, if the CYP isn't ready to talk about it then discussing it in detail in the form of Psychological Advice is unlikely to be the most productive way forward.

Be flexible and reasonable

As above, if the CYP needs to reflect but you've only allowed one hour for the process then you will both be disappointed!

Be human

Mistakes are acceptable. Be honest and sincere about them (as much as you feel that you can).

Be brave

My physiotherapist needed to move my leg in all sorts of ways before knowing how to help. Similarly, you might need to ask some daring questions so as to appropriately highlight a young person's views.

Conclusion

Is it possible to co-construct EP Advice given the 'new' Code of Practice?

Given my reflections, I would argue that co-construction of EP Advice is not only possible but somewhat imperative. For all the seemingly painstaking philosophical dialogue that I had with my supervisor and myself, I felt as though this Advice mattered, primarily because of Suzy's enthusiasm and investment in the process and, from an egotistical point of view, also because I felt good about it.

It remains a matter of professional judgement as to whether or not it is appropriate to co-construct Advice. Having had the opportunity to speak with Suzy's teachers since the Advice, it is clear that it was appropriate on this occasion.

Maybe the premise of the question itself is wrong; anything is possible. Given the philosophical nature of this article, I might be better off asking when it is appropriate to co-construct Advice.

References

Code of Practice (CoP), (2015). Department for Education (DfE), Department for Health (DfH). *Special Educational Need Code of Practice*. Retrieved 10 May 2015, from Gov.UK Web site:
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf

Gersch, I. S., Pratt, G., Nolan, A., & Hooper, S. (1996). Listening to children in educational contexts. In R. Davie, G. Upton & V. Varma (Eds.), *The voice of the child: a handbook for professionals*. Abingdon, England: RoutledgeFalmer.

Appendix A

Profile

Name: Suzy Nash (generated by <http://www.behindthename.com/random/>)

Year Group: 6

Sex: female

Suzy is an only child, who is transitioning from primary school to secondary school. She is a child who was not born in the area she was living in at the time that she and I worked together; her speech impediment and accent made her noticeably different to all others in her class. Most of the difficulties that she is encountering at school are in relation to personal/family circumstances. She is currently not living with her biological mother, something that she feels strongly about, though she finds it difficult to vocalise this. Suzy is known to Social Care and feels as though she has very little choice/control in her own life. I had previously worked with the school staff to support Suzy without having met her. Prior to being asked to provide Psychological Advice, I had the pleasure of meeting/working with Suzy only once. I had further opportunities to meet with her during the statutory process — including following the completion of my Advice, where I asked if she was OK with my reflections of our work as the basis of this written piece.